

Hearings on Religious Freedom in India and Pakistan: Dr. Vijay Sazawal Oral Testimony

September 18, 2000

DR. SAZAWAL: Members of the Commission, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank the Commission for inviting me to testify at this hearing. I consider it a privilege which I will fulfill to the best of my abilities. I've been asked to address the situational analysis with respect to violence against Kashmiri Hindus, usually referred to in the Indian Subcontinent as Kashmiri Pundits [ph].

We, all U.S. citizens, started the Indo-American Kashmir Forum in 1991 after the casualty count in our community in Kashmir touched each and ever Kashmiri Pundit family that has migrated to the U.S. The primary objective of our organization is to highlight and try to bring an end to the atrocities committed against our families in Kashmir. It should be noted that in spite of brutality and humiliation that Pundits have suffered in the past one decade, not one--and let me repeat that, not one--case exists where a Kashmiri Pundit has resorted to any violence in return.

Kashmiri Pundits have paid a heavy price for their nonviolent and tolerant behavior. The sad part is that the Kashmir issue gets so wrapped up in global concerns on one side and obfuscated by massive state-sponsored propaganda on the other that so few people know about the tragic state of Kashmiri Pundits.

It is, by and large, an untold story.

Perhaps Kashmiri Hindus should have foreseen this calamity. In January of 1986, massive criminal riots occurred in Anathnag [ph], which is in the southern part of Kashmir, in which the minority community--that is Pundits in this case--lost nearly 300 homes, and two temples were burned down. What was amazing was that the state government, being run by the majority people, which is the Muslim people, used a massive coverup to hide the event. The local Muslim government in Anathnag, which

has had that historical name since 100 B.C., but which Muslims are officially calling Islamabad; they dismissed the whole event as a fragment of imagination.

I wrote a letter to the New York Times on March 10, 1986, describing how the Kashmiri Pundit minority is being squeezed out of Kashmir, and their reaction was you cannot be serious. Are you telling us Hindus are suffering in predominantly Hindu India? I said yes, and they referred my letter to Mr. Steven Weissman, who was their bureau chief in New Delhi at that time.

Mr. Weissman wrote back to me and to his editor on April 15, 1986, acknowledging, and I quote from his letter, "that protesting Muslims attacked temples, homes, and stores of Kashmiri Pundits." In fact, the indifference shown by both the state government in Kashmir and the central government in India was telling us something which we did not fully comprehend then. Only later, when the killing of Pundits started in earnest from 1989 did we realize how expendable we were as a community.

The local Muslims did not want to display their closet skeletons, and to the central government in Delhi, our community did not have the appeal of a vote bank. Sir, indeed, the aggregate strength of the Pundit community is under 500,000. That is not enough to deliver even a single member of Parliament in India. The criminal riots of 1986 in southern Kashmir and the killing of Pundits that began systematically soon thereafter was viewed in a broader context by commentator Charles Krauthammer in a piece in the Washington Post dated February 16, 1990. We warned the civil society of a new danger that was reflected in the title of his article, the New Crescent of Crisis: Global Intifada.

Mr. Krauthammer described the dangers of the emerging new mix of Islamic fundamentalism and politics. In relationship to Kashmir, he said, and I quote: "The Muslims are fighting for, one, domination of their province; and two, domination over the local non-Muslim minorities."

The killings, rape and plunder of Kashmiri Hindus started in earnest with the death of a prominent social worker in Serinagat [ph] on September 14, 1989, now recognized by our community as a martyr's day. Starting with prominent citizens in the valley, including political leaders and government officials, the killings became increasingly random and gruesome. For example, on April 6, 1990, Mrs. Gurget Aku [ph], a housewife in Cugwana [ph] district of Kashmir, was gang raped by Islamic militants and then cut into pieces by a wood saw.

The Financial Times of London, in a story from Serinegat dated April 1, 1992, described the agony of a Hindu family in Serinegat, and sadly, I have to say it's the same precinct where I was born, that gave food and shelter to two armed Muslim terrorists who initially promised no harm but raped the womenfolk and killed the family anyway.

Over 1,000 Kashmiri Pundits who represent a significant proportion of their population were killed by Islamic militants in merely a two-year period at that time. The militants had a clear motive to drive non-Muslims, whom they call infidels, out of the state to create an Islamic Mustava, and it was not unusual to see posters and announcements asking Pundits to leave the valley.

A prominent Urdu newspaper in Serinegat also ran the following headline on April 14, 1990: Kashmiri Pundits responsible for duress against Muslims should leave the valley within two days.

The consequences of the violence unleashed against Pundits was thus predictable. Nearly all of the Kashmiri Pundits who were lucky to escape from terror did so starting from January 1990. Today, practically the entire indigenous population of Kashmiri Pundits is displaced and living in makeshift refugee camps in North America--north India.

The statistics do not do full justice to their misery. A total of 72,077, representing nearly 98 percent of the Pundit population, were driven out of Kashmir due to ethnic cleansing. The official figures indicate that 16,850 civilians have been--which includes also Muslims and Sikhs, have been killed by terrorists in the period 1981 to 1997. 9,309 homes have been burned down along with 1,659 small businesses. A total of 93 temples, 27 mosques and two Sikh burthivars [ph] were also destroyed in the same period.

Even today, a decade later, nearly 50,000 Kashmiri Hindu families are living in refugee camps with approximately 60 percent camped in the Jamhru [ph] region and 40 percent in the Delhi region. The total number of Kashmiri Pundit refugees totals 360,385, and the number is comparable to the number of Kosovars who were driven out by Serbs, yet no one seems to care about the fate of Kashmiri Pundits.

The central oddity in this whole affair has been the lack of leadership shown by the central government in New Delhi. After all, if the Indian Government is supposedly a pro-Hindu government, as it is often referred to in the Western media, then why did not the central government run by the Congress Party in those years come to the aid of its citizens, even more so as these were Kashmiris who were allied to India?

Ms. Mary McGrory, a columnist for the Washington Post, explained it this way in her by-line dated August 27, 1992: across the globe in Kashmir, blameless people are suffering hellish persecution for not anything they did but for being who they are. The Kashmiri Pundits, a minority Hindu sect that has lived in Kashmir for 5,000 years, would like to go home. They have been driven out of their ancestral land by terrorism of Islamic guerillas who wish to annex Kashmir to the crescent of fundamentalist countries in the area.

India, which will do anything to keep Kashmir in its possession, has refused to acknowledge the existence of Pundits in refugee camps along the border because they do not want to add a religious element to the problem. Previously, the Pakistan Government more or less agreed with the assessment that Kashmiri Pundits were victims of ethnic cleansing. In response to Ms. McGrory's column, Mr. Malek Zahore Ahmed [ph], the press attache in the Embassy of Pakistan, wrote to the Post editor on August 28, 1992, and he wrote: "I am surprised to read about Kashmiri refugees mentioned are notorious Kashmiri Pundits who had built disproportionately excessive powers in the Kashmir Valley and have now been driven out by the hitherto oppressed Kashmiri people."

If Kashmiri Pundits today feel like persecuted Jews of the Nazi era, now you know why. As in the case of Jews, it was the interest showed by the United States that made their problem and its implications known to the world. I want to particularly highlight the work of the House Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, sponsored by Congressman Bill McCollum, which issued a hard-hitting report, the Kashmir Connection, on May 21, 1994, detailing two dimensions of jihad in Kashmir.

After sustained effort by our organization with the help of Democratic Congressman Shel Brown, the U.S. State Department agreed in 1996 to rectify a past omission and make mention of the Pundit community in the annual World Rights Report. Small as these efforts may seem, these were actually highly significant insofar as Kashmiri Hindus were concerned, since the Government, since the Indian Government was little inclined to recognize their problems.

Kashmiri Pundits have been living a life of misery from their lands, and will they be allowed to return? And that's a big question right now, and most of the statements from the militants say that they will not be allowed in.

Let me conclude by saying that first, we thank the Commission for allowing us to speak on behalf of Kashmiri Pundits who are refugees in their own country. Second, the Pundits were driven out by ethnic cleansing simply because of their religious beliefs that put them at odds with the jihad being aided and abetted by Pakistan but cloaked in the politically correct garb of a freedom struggle.

Third, Pundits are withering away in refugee camps, and the entire community that has lived in Kashmir uninterrupted for 5,000 years is racing towards oblivion. Fourth, nobody--not the Indian Government; not the international human rights organizations; not the U.S. Government, seems to care, all offering nothing more than the usual rhetoric. And finally, if you wish the Indian Government to take more effective steps to protect religious freedom and lives and security of persons of the religious minorities of India, as Mr. Abrams wrote in a letter to the President on September 6, I would please request you to make sure to include and identify Kashmiri Hindus as victims, too.

Thank you.